

Sermon: Year C, Proper 15

Texts: Jeremiah 23:23-29

Hebrews 12:1-14

Luke 12:49-56

Schadenfreude: it's a lovely German word, which, you may well know, refers to the very human habit of taking delight in someone else's misfortune. I learned the word in high school, but I didn't really experience it distinctly until much later. It's an emotion that requires a few hard knocks of one's own before it can be deliciously felt with regard to others.

I do remember from years ago, however, one particular incident, when Oral Roberts, the famous evangelist, provided me several weeks to wallow in full-fledged Schadenfreude, time to enjoy the strangely satisfying anticipation of the impending disaster that, he threatened, might arise from his travails.

The Oral Roberts University and Medical Center had fallen on hard times, and he was facing payments for which he had no money. So he made very public appeals on television, in which he let it be known that he needed immediately a certain amount of new contributions to cover his debt. The total was not insignificant, more than eight million dollars. Maybe it was the sheer extent of the problem that led him to his concluding words, but he finished every message by saying that all the monies had to be received within days. And then to this he added his crowning threat. He declared that God had told him that he should ascend to the top of the university's famous tower, and if the people did not respond, God, he warned, would "call him home."

It was a curiously ambiguous phrase. Roberts never tried to clarify exactly what he meant by it. Friends and experts openly opined that if he failed to meet his goals, he would be in such despair that leaping from the tower was not out of question. And this soon became the subject of daily news updates. Reporters kept watch, waiting for the time when Roberts would actually climb to the heights, his fate completely dependent on the generosity of others. The initial slow pace of donations fueled an eager speculation of just what might happen, and to our own surprise, my friends and I couldn't help but hope, quietly, that at the last the totals would fall short. It was too tempting to imagine, after all the talk and all the commercialized invocations of God's will, how Roberts could possibly escape profound humiliation – the embarrassment of having to take back the very words that he had so earnestly employed in God's name for his own projects. As the deadline approached, we became increasingly intrigued, and Roberts' messages sounded all the more woeful and desperate. The future looked bleak... and wonderful.

But then, in the final hour a wealthy benefactor came forward, offering millions, just enough to tip the scales, and Roberts was freed from the consequences of his own statements. We were disappointed. The looming culmination of our Schadenfreude was interrupted. The donor, however, noted that he gave the money, not out of a desire to help the university or Roberts personally. He gave the money only in an effort to stop the circus surrounding the whole event. It had become a pathetic spectacle, he said, which, for Roberts could not be paraded as a triumph but, in a more subtle way than suicide, was a deep disgrace, nonetheless. His words still bit him. They had proved manipulative and self-serving. Hence, our desire to see them fall to nothing: Schadenfreude.

We have heard this morning a reading from the prophet Jeremiah, who was, and remains today, the great guardian of speech purported to be God's own. "I have dreamed! I have dreamed!" he said, with derision about the false prophets of his own time. God is a handy ally for all those who really have themselves or their own desires in mind. We all know that invoking God can be a most effective ploy. It plays on peoples' guilt. It feeds off their best intentions. God is used to justify actions blindly and to excuse our own culpability when things go awry. It's easy to see this in the great array of television preachers who have an insatiable appetite for donations without a trace of responsibility in return. Threats and promises alike are broadcast indiscriminately, to everyone and anyone, addressed to no one in particular, somewhere on the other, distant end of an electrical divide.

But these evangelists (and I use the term loosely) are simply following, on a larger scale, the very habits of many Christians in many local parishes, for whom God is really like the great Oz, principally responsible for trading favors. Live well and you'll receive God's benefit. Live poorly and you'll suffer God's judgment. Pray hard and God will help you out. Pray harder and you can expect miracles. After all, it is much emphasized, God wants us to be prosperous. Even more, he wants us to be rich, and somewhere in his Word (so it is declared) we can decipher his plan for our wealth, our health, and our happiness.

These are no more than magic incantations. They open the wallets of countless thousands. But few notice what this does to God. They are too focused on their own fortunes to realize that the God they fashion is little more than a personal lackey, shaped by their own needs and wants. God is not God but is merely a talisman. Baal, said Jeremiah: an idol bent to our own will. Such dreams tend to fail. But worse, one dream, said to have been fulfilled, can fool us into believing that the dreamer is a prophet who will help us succeed where alone we did not. There are profits to be gleaned in prophecy, in dreaming dreams that only bite others. Oral Roberts was a master of this. God's word always meant that there was more to build, more to buy, more money to be collected, and more success that could be enjoyed.

God, however, is not a means to an end. Nor is God's word merely a form of advice for our life. God's word is simply and plainly the revelation of God, by which God makes himself known, as God, and as the one who freely chooses to be in communion with us, not for a time, not for a project, not under restriction, pending our own response and agreement, but solely in the expanse of God's own eternity. God alone is the one whose words "do not return empty". They "accomplish that for which they were purposed". So said the prophet Isaiah, not dreaming a dream but naming the limitless power of God – power enough to create from nothing, transforming chaos into universe; power enough to forgive without conditions, transforming degradation into embrace; power enough to give himself to us completely, suffering at our hands, in order to show what true power is – which is relationship that never takes back its hand nor strikes in revenge, but holds together all things. God's word is God's gift of himself, without reserve, through the world, to us.

The apostle Paul recognized this and drew out its implications with his exuberant exclamation that by God's grace we are free to rejoice always, regardless of all circumstance. For all the world, in spite of its being fractured and divided, is still grounded in God, and no life, once

begun, can fall from the infinite expanse of God's passion. No one is too small or too far removed. The redemption of all things, he said, has been accomplished. And thus in any and all situations, whether we are abased or abound, whether we face hunger or enjoy plenty, we may give thanks because God's assiduous redeeming of all things includes us. These are not vague dreams but prophetic words. They are prophetic precisely because they tell the truth about God, about God's creating, and about our lives within God's providence.

And interestingly, these affirmations replace Schadenfreude with something that is almost its complete opposite. We may be happy with those who are happy and, even in the face of suffering, we may offer hope that is free of despair and such incarnate love that suffering no longer suggests God's abandonment but the intensity of God's presence with us, always.

Gottesfriede: it's a term, I'm sure I can say, is used far less often, which you have probably never heard, which means the peace of God. It does not signify the peace we want for ourselves, on our own terms, the peace that we expect or hope God will give us if we curry his favor enough. It means, very differently and simply, the peace that *is* God, God himself.

If we can make this word our practice and, thus, our witness, then our own messages of faith will not seem cheap or tawdry or saccharine or gallingly offensive or mean and proud together or grossly mercenary – all of which are charges leveled against the church. Rather, our words, and we ourselves, will appear both deeply humane and deeply divine, together. And people will be able to see in us the endurance of grace, the possibility of reconciliation, the desire for beauty, and a never diminished passion for justice. They will see in us the image of God, not the play of our own dreams.

Gottesfriede. Our calling is to keep such words as this: words that keep the world; words that tell of God who keeps all things, who is happy not in misfortune but in complete redemption.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen